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Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., 'American Idol' honors Quentin Joe as hero for saving baby sister from house fire

CHINLE, Ariz. – Quentin Joe was taking all the attention in stride, as quietly as an 11-year-old could surrounded by adults lauding his heroism.

"It's OK," he said about his growing fame and celebrity following a week of being filmed for a special feature on American Idol's inspirational children segment, "Idol Gives Back."

"I'm proud of you, I want you to know that," Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., told him over lunch in the Chinle Elementary School on Sunday, April 1. "Who knows, you might even be president some day. It's all about helping, just like you helped your sister."

Just three months ago, on Jan. 6, the trailer where Quentin, his mother Alta Yazzie, and his four siblings live caught fire and burned to the ground, leaving nothing.

In the beginning moments, everyone escaped from the fully engulfed blaze except his baby sister Philanthia, 21 months. So Quentin broke a window, crawled back into the burning trailer, covered his sister with a blanket, and ran out again to save her life.

"They just took off and didn't know what to do," Alta Yazzie said. "They ran out with no clothes, no shoes on, their eyeglasses are still in there, they're all burned."

The family lost everything; clothes, toys, furniture, documents. And only a year earlier, Mrs. Yazzie had lost her husband, Phillip, 39, of Chinle.

The fire started in the master bedroom from an electrical outlet. The children were playing in the living room when



Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., presents a basketball to Quentin Joe because his was destroyed in the fire that burned his home in January. With him is his mother Alta Yazzie, his older brother Valentino, Chinle Elementary School principal Karina Roessel, and his 6th grade teacher Eddie Scott



they smelled smoke, she said. They tried to put it out but it raged fiercer. When Quentin realized his baby sister was not outside with the others, he acted to save her life.

The story of his heroism made it to Mike Kienan, communications director for Save The Children who in turn told the hit television show American Idol which plans to feature Quentin.

"He's really a remarkable young man," Mr. Kienan said. "When Quentin realized that his sister was still in the

house, he made sure that he got her out. We're talking about a culture, a set of values, that allows a child like Quentin to think in these terms."

On April 24, the show will present "Idol Gives Back" to raise awareness of the effects of poverty on children and young people in the United States and Africa.

On April 25, the show will feature celebrity artists performing at both the American Idol stage and Disney Hall, including: Keira Knightley, Hugh Grant, Helena Bonham Carter, Forest Whitaker, Pink, Gwen Stefani, Mr. Bean - Rowan Atkinson, and Daniel Radcliffe, star of the Harry Potter movies.

Quentin's heroism and quick thinking was recognized by President Shirley and Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley on Sunday at his school.

"This is a fantastic thing you have done on behalf of your sister, on behalf his family, on behalf of the community," the President said.

He said it brought to mind how Navajo people still have a strong sense of family values with culture.

Despite the recognition, the family continues to struggle to get by.

"We're staying where the trailer is burned in the small hogan," Mrs. Yazzie said. "We're all packed in that hogan with no running water, no electricity, everything's gone. So everything is total loss. We're barely getting some donations from people, neighbors, from the school."

Even so, she said Quentin's heroism, his recognition and saving the life of his sister, has helped her recover from the loss of her husband and the loss of the family's home, and the ironic necessity of continuing to have to make payments on a trailer reduced to black ash.

"I'm so excited what he's doing. I'm just so happy," she said. "I've never been like this before, and it got me back up on my feet because after I lost my husband I was so...really low. I don't know what to do, and then the trailer burned down again, so, right now I'm just so excited. I'm so excited. I'm so happy."



Quentin and his sister Philanthia.
Donovan Quintero Photo
for the Navajo Times